

THE PROBLEM OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY MEMBERSHIP

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The real problem facing us: if we are not allowing

members to vote for their leader, we have to concede that there must be a different reason for those members to feel valued. Yet, there is no easy fix here.

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The Conservative Party has a problem it does not know how to deal with: its membership. At the end of the (first) leadership race of this year, Liz Truss won with [81,326 votes](#) against Rishi Sunak's 60,399. According to [The Financial Times](#), this suggests that as many as 30,000 members (17%) of the 172,000 did not vote. In addition to this, following the (second) leadership race after Ms. Truss's abortive government ended, [many members resigned their allegiance to the party](#), in protest of what they saw as a coronation of Sunak, the establishment favourite.

A decline in membership is not new. Tim Bale's *The Conservative Party Since 1945* neatly summarises the rapidity of decline in the 1980s. Roughly 1.2 million Tory Party members at the end of 1982 had nearly halved by 1990. Certainly, a dwindling popular base is a problem for any party in an age of mass democracy, but the specific problem of the membership of the Conservative Party is that the party does not know what to *do* with it.

In the case of leadership elections, the role of the membership needs to be re-examined. [Lord Jonathan Sumption's observation](#) that the membership of the Conservative Party is not representative of the country is a reasonable one, and whilst in decades past when that membership was over a million that may not have been true, in an age when the party membership hovers just above 150,000 it certainly is. Yet even mass-membership parties are, inevitably, unrepresentative of the country, as only genuinely committed or ideologically driven political activists join parties.

We saw the problem of this in the days of Corbyn's Momentum, when the ideologically

rigid socialist movement [held its chosen messiah in place when the Parliamentary party clearly wanted rid of him](#). In many ways, this was a problem of over-democratisation, following Ed Miliband's [changes to the rules of the internal leadership election](#), moving from a collegiate system to a one-member, one-vote system, meaning the more hard-line activists within the party could not be overridden by the party apparatus.

What might this mean for the Conservatives? Some argue that the party should allow the membership to be involved earlier on in the process, perhaps in deciding the final two that the MPs then choose between, or in attending US-style primaries. There are merits and limitations to different suggestions made, but one point that must not be forgotten is that, as Edmund Burke argued in his "[Speech to the Bristol Electors](#)," we must be prepared to defer to our representatives' judgement. The situation has changed since Burke's day, though even in 1774 the choice of the electors was constrained; but particularly from a practical perspective, MPs must inevitably be more sympathetic to the wider national tone than members of the Conservative Party, most of all because they are accountable to them.

For this reason alone, it makes sense that the primary organ by which the Conservative Party leader—in government or not—should be chosen is the Parliamentary Conservative Party. This leaves us, however, with a conundrum: if the members do not get to choose their leader, then what can they do?

Indeed, this may even exacerbate a problem of the party's own making; at present, the membership of the party is little more than a group of activists who are wheeled out every few years to stuff envelopes, post through letterboxes, and take an earache from disgruntled constituents. These poor activists are held on with the hint of a possibility of maybe having a career in the party, even though the chances of that happening are extraordinarily slim.

There is, it must be admitted, a [Conservative Party Policy Forum](#)—but I doubt the party pays much attention to it. Consider the [Response Form](#), in which the party asks such questions as what "3 to 6 letter slogan" the Party should adopt, or even how long—in

pages—the manifesto should be. Superficial and cosmetic suggestions all, these “invited contributions” are chickenfeed from an otherwise indifferent party.

The problem repeats itself at the Conference. Although the policy forum has a presence, it is little more than a talking shop, whilst the real intellectual heavy lifting—if it is done at all—comes in the form of panels stocked with failed apparatchiks or, even worse, opposition organisations that seek to lecture the grassroots on their wrong opinions.

This hardly resolves the problem of the Conservative Party membership. But the problem goes deeper than merely “what the membership can do,” if anything at all; the deeper issue is who is and should be allowed to be part of that membership. Indeed, it was reasonably pointed out by Labour and opposition MPs that, should the membership vote for the next leader (and, by extension, the next Prime Minister), from where came *their* authority? Why does the membership have the authority to elect the *de facto* leader of the country, when the only condition of membership is to have paid a small fee?

If we are going to pretend to be a democratic party, we should do a better job of it. But that, in turn, means we have to grapple with the question in democratic theory of ‘who should vote?’ This isn’t a tendential or trivial issue, but a quite serious one: if we accept the reasonable objection that the Conservative Party membership should not vote for the leader when that party is in power, then who should? I argued above that the Parliamentary Party should, but for many people this is even less democratic (because most people have a simple quantitative approach to democracy: more voters = more democracy). Though you really do have to respect Leftists who understand Burkean principles.

But if you discount *that* option, then you are led into an infinite regress: where do you draw the line? If neither the MPs nor the membership, then who? In democratic theory, the commitment to democracy means that line cannot be drawn via democratic means—i.e. we cannot vote on who should vote because we would need a vote to determine who votes in that vote ... and so on. Some arbitrary rules are good, at the very least for practical utility.

This leads us to the real problem facing us: if we are not allowing members to vote for their leader, we have to concede that there must be a different reason for those members to feel valued. Yet, there is no easy fix here. Lawrence Black wrote [a fantastic paper](#) in 2008 detailing the “lost world of young conservatism” that, whilst focused on young members’ experiences, carries within it a great deal of wisdom. For instance, one of the principal methods of retaining members (and, importantly, increasing numbers) was the *social* element of being a young conservative; but then, once the social element had got people into the party, they could be deployed as loyal and faithful activists, *because* they felt valued.

In addition to the social element of being a party member, there does need to be a greater inclusion of grassroots members in policy fora, and these need to be more elaborate than what, in effect, amounts to a chat room. Older members of the party who I speak to regularly reminisce about the chance for genuine policy proposal and discussions at the annual Conference, but in an age of working-from-home and of digital engagement like never before, there really is no excuse why at least *one* MP could not host town-hall-style policy discussions with the grassroots, or even just a simple Q & A.

These are not grand proposals, and I do not believe they will save Britain or even this party, but there is a practical use here. The next election will not be kind to Conservatives, whether we win a majority or not, and the party will need new ideas if it hopes to overcome its stasis. But more importantly than that, it will need an army of dedicated activists—at the moment, it boasts only a paltry militia. Members need a reason to feel valued, and the party needs to give them one.